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U.S. Senators on Twitter: Party Polarization in 140 Characters

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U.S. Senators on Twitter: Party Polarization in 140 Characters

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Dedication

I dedicate this report to those friends and family who have always supported me.

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Abstract

U.S. Senators on Twitter: Party Polarization in 140 Characters

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The tenor of the U.S. Senate no longer relies on traditions of apprenticeship and courtesy. The modern reality is a highly party-polarized institution, encouraging intraparty loyalty and interparty discord. Senators' behavior on roll-call votes and amendments exhibit this hyper-partisan culture, but that culture extends beyond voting behavior. Members' media activities, including communications with constituents and each other, are equally appealing venues to express excessive partisanship. New media technologies, such as Twitter, offer a low-cost alternative for members to express malcontent with an opposing party while signaling intra-party support. In this paper, I tease out the extent to which a member's party and leadership status affect his likelihood to engage in the partisan discourse that now spans social media. I introduce a unique dataset from the 112th Congress that catalogues six months of senatorial Twitter activity and find that minority party members and party leaders are more likely to name-call and express party loyalty. Twitter may be an alternative agenda space for minority interests that seek to alter the status quo and a public relations platform for party leaders who are tasked with shaping the debate.

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INTRODUCTION

Partisan rancor in the U.S. Senate reached a tipping point November 21, 2013, as the once prestigious and deliberative body went “nuclear” and ditched the filibuster for judicial and executive branch nominees. Democrats pushed through the reform on a 52-48 party-line vote, sparking backlash and promised retaliation by the Republican minority. "Some of us have been around here long enough to know that sometimes the shoe is on the other foot," Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said before the vote, telling Democrats "you may regret this a lot sooner than you think."¹ Threats of the nuclear option are nothing new to the Senate, and are indicative of a body that, from the Senate floor to social media, has become an increasingly heated partisan battleground.

In this battleground, compromise and bipartisan cooperation increasingly sound like the lessons of an Aesop fable rather than political realities. The tenor of the Senate no longer relies on folkways of apprenticeship and courtesy (Matthews 1959). The modern reality is a highly party-polarized institution, encouraging intraparty loyalty and interparty discord (Rohde and Aldrich 2010). Party polarization is additionally entrenched when members not only refuse to compromise, but actively antagonize their opposition. Politicians’ partisan behavior goes beyond ideological differences when members act as partisan warriors by using humiliating and destructive tactics — ugly

¹ As quoted by Michael O’Brien, November 21, 2013 for NBC News. “Democrats Drop the Nuclear Bomb, So What Happens Next?”

politics — to serve their own policy and electoral interests (Theriault 2013, Theriault 2008, Sinclair 2006, Lee 2009).

Senators' behavior on roll-call votes and amendments exhibit this hyper-partisan culture (Theriault 2013, Sinclair 2006), but that culture extends beyond voting behavior. Member communications with constituents and each other are equally appealing venues to express excessive partisanship. Senators wage a public relations battle by bolstering their communications staff and benefiting from media outlets' need to fill the airwaves or column inches (Sinclair 2006). Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer of New York is the poster child for riding the cable TV gravy train, but new media technologies, such as Twitter, are extending this partisan game and punching a ticket for every member of the Senate.

Consumer-generated media violates traditional producer-consumer media norms; Twitter offers policymakers a new, unfiltered opportunity to indicate policy preferences and advertise their political brand. But in addition to self-promotion, politicians take advantage of social media to engage in party promotion and partisan attacks. Twitter offers a low-cost alternative for members to express malcontent with an opposing party while signaling intra-party party support.

Partisanship is alive and well on social media, but senators do not uniformly express that partisanship. In this paper, I tease out the extent to which a member's party

and leadership status affect their likelihood to engage in the partisan discourse that now spans social media. First, I discuss why members are motivated to adopt social media as a political communication tool, and why Twitter is an increasingly important measure for senatorial behavior. Second, I introduce a dataset from the 112th Congress that catalogues six months of senatorial Twitter activity. I find that minority party members and party leaders are more likely to name-call and express party loyalty. Finally, I explore additional explanations for we see these patterns on Twitter, and what future analyses might be fruitful for the connection between Twitter and party polarization.

WHY TWITTER?

Social media gives senators increased ability to engage in partisan attacks, but beyond party politics, members have at least three underlying reasons for turning to Twitter: opportunity, individual interest, and unlimited agenda space. Twitter's utility is its ability to facilitate members' goals, and senators execute those goals by indicating preferences, reaching out to constituents, or engaging a partisan battle. Twitter provides a platform that, unlike traditional methods of agenda setting or political sporting, is far less limited by institutional constraints or procedure.

Twitters' open network has more than 500 million active users and more than 100 thousand users sign up each day ("Twitter Statistics"), and Senate members are likewise taking advantage of this online opportunity. When the 112th Congress gaveled into session, 44 percent of the Senate had signed up for Twitter (Sharp 2013). By the beginning of the 113th Congress, every member of the U.S. Senate had a verified Twitter account and many maintained separate campaign accounts. While just 15 percent of Internet users have Twitter accounts (Pew Internet and American Life), members have decided that Twitter is worth their effort. That effort is the burden of the communications staff tasked with maintaining these online accounts. Members employ multiple press aides, including communications directors and press secretaries, who are capable of overseeing new media platforms. Barbara Sinclair suggests that media staff hires are some of the most critical within a members' staff (2006). A competent communications

staff is even more important for party leaders who are tasked with crafting a message for not only themselves but the party as well.

Senators are not merely adapting to a new digital opportunity, but Twitter has the potential to further individual interests. Members' goals are satisfied when they can target attention to desired policies or set the political agenda. David Mayhew (1974) argues that members achieve their ultimate goal of re-election through advertising, credit claiming and position taking. All three tenets are fulfilled via Twitter. Senators can advertise on Twitter by building an online presence and developing their brand. Twitter offers a type of new-media franking privilege where members can highlight their individual or party achievements and boost their image by deriding the opposition party.

@Sen Landrieu: Proud to launch Democratic Small Business Committee Facebook page. Like the new page at <https://www.facebook.com/SenateSmallBusinessCommitteeDemocrats> ...

Twitter serves a senator's credit claiming activities by offering members unlimited space to answer: "what have you done — or not done — for me lately?" Members often use Twitter to draw attention to introduced legislation, economic development in their state, and federal services the member has delivered home. Senators can additionally point out what the other party has not delivered or stalled.

@SenLeahy: By punting the #FarmBill, House leaders sow economic uncertainty, instead of crops and dairy. Farmers need ability to plan.

Last, senators use Twitter to indicate policy preferences. In a previous study, I examined 25 senators, over a six-month period in 2012, and found at least 40 percent of the sample senators' tweets included a policy position.

@JerryMoran: This week I officially became a supporter of S. 202, The Federal Reserve Transparency Act, better known as the "Audit the Fed" bill.

Members fulfilled these activities before Twitter, but unlike traditional activities such as roll-call votes or issuing press releases, social media provides a multi-function platform that incurs minimal opportunity costs or resource allocation. Writing legislation and offering amendments takes time and effort that a 140-character tweet does not.

Twitter's low-cost advantages are furthered when members utilize Twitter's unlimited agenda space. The quality of the attention members seek out may not equal that of traditional media, legislation, or committee action, but this agenda is not at the mercy of typical barriers such as legislation investment, media moderation, or party-controlled agenda space. Twitter requires a satisfactory Internet connection and a reliable intern. Now, the likelihood that the intern, also known as the office barista, is tasked with

a Twitter account seems unlikely, but the research and staffing required for bill writing trumps the most eloquent tweet. Additionally, members avoid the hassle of coordinating with traditional media outlets and adhering to their deadlines. They can articulate a position without the media contextualizing or reporting the opposing position. Finally, members must contend with the reality that the agenda is narrow and a function of the majority party. Minority members who seek to redefine problems or redirect the agenda have little recourse within the institution, but senators can direct attention to their desired issue preferences or attack the majority party on Twitter, hoping to generate enough attention to move the agenda. Minority members may also have electoral concerns in mind when trying to shape the agenda, creating opportunities for position taking on Twitter that can be used to campaign on later (Finnochiaro and Rhode 2008).

Twitter offers members a unique, low-cost opportunity to meet their individual political and policy goals, therefore requiring scholars to understand Twitter as a new measure of member behavior. We cannot assume Twitter serves a function similar to cosponsorship, press releases or floor speeches — the audience, resources and relevance are not uniform. Twitter is immediate, reactionary and overtly public, and previous measures of members' behavior do not meet each of those characteristics. We similarly cannot assume Twitter fits traditional media norms for public outreach or agenda setting — social media violates the media's gate-keeping function. Social media places journalists and politicians on the same playing field as they both seek an audience for

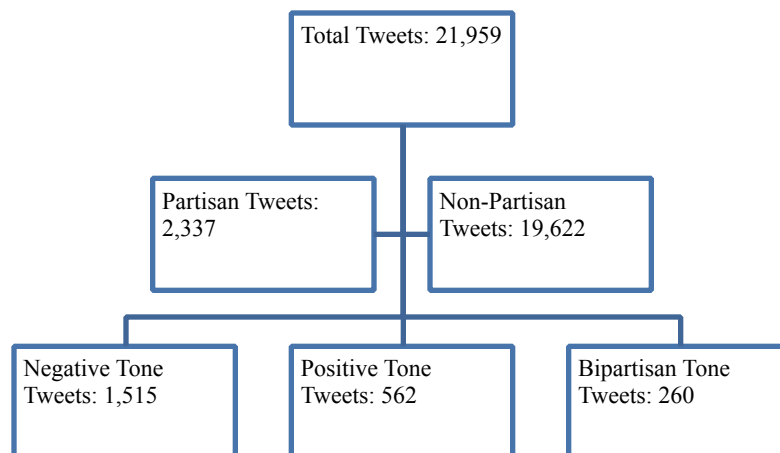
their message and attempt to brand their product — newspaper or politician. As politicians normalize new, online behaviors, which include party squabbles, we must ask what motivates these members to seek a platform like Twitter to meet their interests?

PARTY CONFLICT ON TWITTER IN THE 112TH CONGRESS

To understand what motivates goal-oriented members to hurl partisan attacks at one another on Twitter, we must know who is perpetuating the partisan language. This study analyzes the partisanship on Twitter by U.S. senators during the final six months of the 112th Congress to assess to what extent is the social media site serving as a platform for partisan attacks, party loyalty, or even a seemingly contradictory type of partisanship — bipartisan cooperation. This study relies on a unique dataset² of each senator's Twitter activity between July 1, 2012, and December 31, 2012.³ Each senator included in the dataset has a verified Twitter account, either managed individually or by the member's press office, from which the account sends messages with varying degrees of regularity. For example, Vermont's Democratic Sen. Bernie Sanders produced more than 1,000 tweets during the six-months, but Alabama's Republican Sen. Richard Shelby totaled less than 50 tweets. Republicans totaled 9,187 tweets, and Democrats totaled 12,772 tweets from the 21,959-tweet dataset.

² This dataset was a collaborative project, made possible by the Professor Sean Theriault and undergraduate research fellows Chandler Minaldi and Andrew Gray.

³ The dataset includes information for 90 senators, as data was not available at time of collection for 10 former and current members.



The tweets of each senator are coded on two dimensions: partisanship and tone. Tweets are first coded in a binary fashion based upon whether the message includes any partisan language or lacks a partisanship component. Non-partisan tweets primarily include constituent outreach, press or policy announcements, or celebratory messages. The second dimension attempts to better understand the type of partisanship senators are relying upon. Tone is comprised of three topics: negative attacks, party loyalty, and bipartisan support. Negative attacks represent the language expected by ugly politics or party warriors (Theriault 2013, Sinclair 2006). Members directly chastise, criticize or blame the opposing party.

@SenRandPaul: It boggles the mind to think that now, during an economic recession, Senate Dems put forth a plan to raise taxes....

Party loyalty rhetoric is the more traditional notion of partisanship that signals favoritism or support for one's own party, such as promoting the party's candidates in upcoming elections.

@JerryMoran: Good to see my fmr House colleague @PaulRyanVP as @MittRomney #VP pick. His budget experience is crucial for debt reduction and econ growth

Often considered the opposite of expected partisan language, bipartisanship includes signals for cooperation and compromise.

@ChuckGrassley: PresObama invited me to WhiteHouse for signing of bill I've bill I been working bipartisan: Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act Thanks

The dataset includes additional binary codes for senator's party ID and leadership status.

To answer the question of who is more likely to engage in partisan behaviors, I put forth two hypotheses that posit partisan language on Twitter — specifically party loyalty and party attacks — is a most useful tactic for minority members and party leaders.

- *Minority Party Hypothesis: Members of the minority party are more likely than members of the majority party to include partisan attacks or party-loyalty language in their Twitter messages.*

Social media is a valuable attention-seeking tool for minority party members whose interests are not served by the status quo. Despite the unique power of individual senators, majority parties control the agenda — and minority members regain that control once they disrupt the agenda or are no longer in the minority. Twitter offers members unlimited opportunities to attack the majority party — while simultaneously bolstering their own party brand — in hopes of drawing unwanted attention to redefine the agenda. Negative campaigns are successful in motivating people to vote (Fridkin Kahn and Kenney 1999), and partisan attacks on Twitter may be a similar solution to garner favorable election results.

- *Leadership Hypothesis: Party leaders are more inclined to include partisan attacks or party-loyalty language in their Twitter messages than rank-and-file members.*

More so than any single member, the leaders' focus is the party brand relative to the opposing party. They are tasked with influencing the terms of the political debate and furthering their members' legislative goals (Sinclair 2006). Leaders' interests are not only individual re-election because their leadership status depends on party success. Human nature leads us to seek power, and people will seek out all means — even Twitter

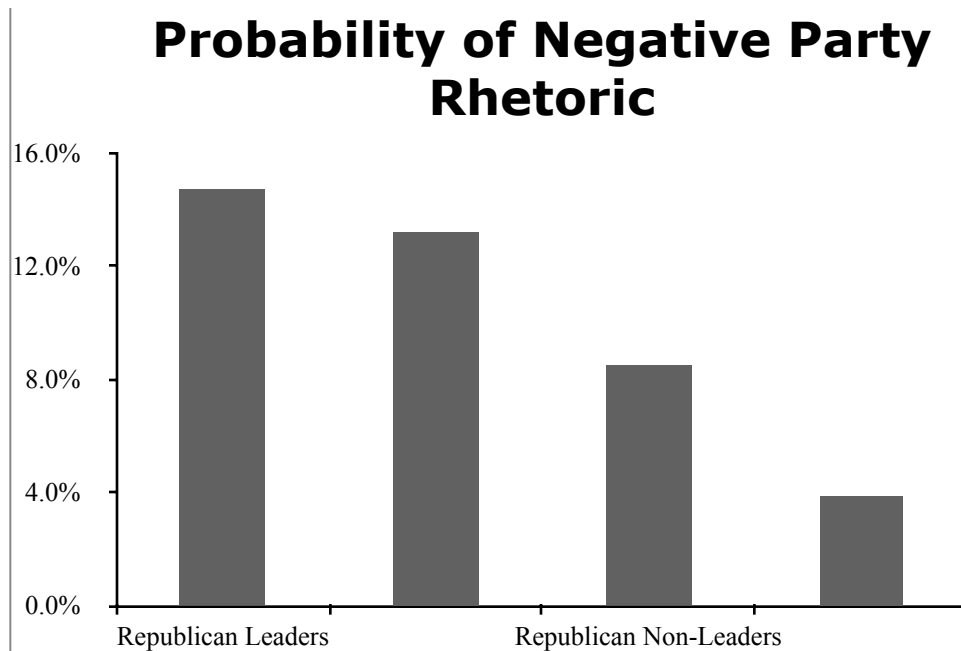
— to guard against threats to that power. Party leaders — regardless of minority or majority status — are more likely to use Twitter as agents of the party to bolster the party's brand and tarnish the competition.

DATA AND RESULTS

To test these hypotheses, I estimate a logit model to assess the effect of party ID and leadership status on members' likelihood to use partisan rhetoric on Twitter. I repeat this model for each tone of partisanship language: negative attacks, party loyalty and bipartisan support. Party ID is coded as a "1" for Republican and "0" for Democrat, and leadership status is "1" for a leader and "0" for a non-leader. Table 1 reports the results of the estimation models.

<u>Table 1: Logit Model of Partisan Rhetoric</u>			
<u>Coefficients</u>	<u>Model 1: Negative</u>	<u>Model 2: Positive</u>	<u>Model 3: Bipartisan</u>
Minority party	0.82(0.06)***	0.56(0.09)***	-0.30(0.14)*
Leadership	1.30(0.10)***	0.56(0.17)***	-0.41(0.41)
Minority x Leadership	-0.69(0.12)***	-0.92(0.23)***	0.08(0.32)
Constant	-3.19(0.05)***	-3.19(0.07)***	-4.26(0.08)***

I find positive and statistically significant coefficients for party ID and leadership status' affect on negative or attack-oriented partisan language. Polarizing attacks are the most common type of partisan language communicated by senators on Twitter, as 6.9 percent of all tweets and 65.5 percent of partisan tweets are negative. To illustrate these results, Figure 1 shows the predicted probabilities for members to engage in ugly politics.

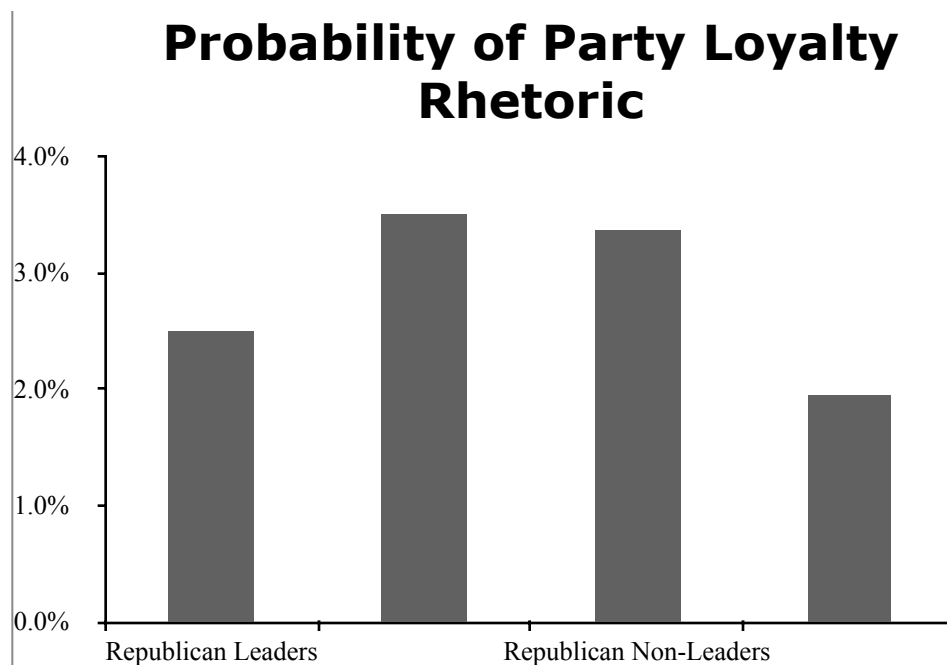


These results suggest that, on average, Republicans, the minority party in the Senate, are more likely than Democrats to rely on negative partisan rhetoric. These results are unsurprising since minority party members' interests are served by actively trying to upset the status quo. Member preferences that are not valued as highly within the institution can be re-directed online and those preferences are catalogued in the public record.

While minority members more often seek non-institutional agenda setting venues, this discrepancy is somewhat muted when you consider the affect of party leadership. Republican rank-and-file members are more likely to engage in partisan attacks than their Democrat counterparts, but among the leadership no significant difference between Democrats or Republicans exists. The significant difference is intraparty: leaders are

more likely to engage in partisan attacks than rank-and-file members. Frances Lee (2009) suggests that party conflict also stems from the competition for power and office, and party leaders are at the front lines of that competition. Their efficacy is externally derived from the power of the party and that power is maintained by party status relative to the opposition. For many members elected in “safe” districts where opposition is minimal, attacking the other party is fruitless, but for leaders whose positions also depend on victories on a national scale, the aggregate party brand is critical.

The impact of party ID and leadership is similarly significant when members attempt to strategically support their party or indicate their preference for their party’s candidates or members. The model produces positive and statistically significant coefficients for party ID and leadership status’ affect on the likelihood that a member will engage in party-loyalty language. Fewer tweets include party loyalty language — 2.6 percent of all tweets and 23.9 percent of partisan tweets. To better illustrate these results, Figure 2 shows the predicted probabilities for members to engage in party support.



Party loyalty language is less common on Twitter, and the differences between party are not as wide, but still significant. In this model, Republicans as a whole are slightly more likely to tweet support for their party, and that difference is most stark between rank-and-file members. Minority members' ability to shape policy and control the agenda is largely dependent upon building up the party brand for upcoming elections. Unlike the attack-oriented language, Democratic leaders are the most probable group to be partisan online, more so than more than Republican leaders. Majority-party leaders are tasked with maintaining their majority, and one way to do that is tow the party line and support majority party policies and candidates. Loyalty language is arguably less offensive than attack-oriented language and majority members may rely on this rhetoric to sustain their majority status.

The final iteration of the model examines how likely senators are to highlight bipartisan achievements or cooperation with other members. Bipartisan language is unsurprisingly the least common among the three tones, accounting for about 1.2 percent of all tweets, and 11.1 percent of partisan tweets. Unlike the previous measures, the probability of using bipartisan rhetoric is only significant for the party ID indicator. Democrats are more likely to use cooperative language than Republicans, and no significant distinction exists between leaders and non-leaders. This result supports the logic that members of the majority party do not need to tarnish the minority party brand to maintain the status quo, so they seek more positive and less overt partisan measures to bolster their own brand.

ADDITIONAL EXPLANATIONS

The results of the estimation models support my hypotheses that (a) minority party members are more likely to engage in party polarizing language and (b) those members who hold leadership positions will also repeat partisan rhetoric. Twitter may be an alternative agenda space for minority interests that seek to alter the status quo and a public relations platform for party leaders who are tasked with shaping the debate. In addition to agenda setting and PR tactics, we may also look outside Congress to explain member behavior on Twitter. Two potentially significant exogenous concerns that are not considered in this analysis are the relationship between the White House and Congress and the presence of pending elections.

In addition to being commander-in-chief, the president is also the face of his political party. His bully pulpit power and the media attention he draws position him as the party's pied piper, even more so than the actual national party chair. As the party's central figure, he opens himself up to numerous critics whose interests are served by unfavorable perceptions of the president and therefore de facto unfavorable for the party. The president may be an easy target for partisan attacks, bolstering the minority party's opportunities to take a dig at the opposition. The president would serve as a one-stop-shop for minority party members to take shots at the majority party, with the intention that the negative image spread to the majority party as a whole. For instance, Republican senators in the 112th Congress often attacked the president and Democratic Party on

Twitter for “Obamacare” and the “#ObamaEconomy,” but Democrats lacked a central figure to blame, therefore they were not as readily primed to go negative.

Taking shots at the President may not just be a factor of convenience. Despite the need for senators to work with the White House to pass legislation, members may see long-term electoral gains by promoting this adversarial relationship with the president. Members up for election in a given cycle may turn to Twitter to brand themselves as the better choice by attacking the credentials of the other party. Constituencies with low presidential-approval ratings may be more likely to respond to this negative relationship. Negative campaigning works, and members can take advantage of negative party politics online.

They may also use Twitter to boost not only their bona fides, but to increase the clout of intraparty members running for election. In the fall of 2012, many Republican senators used their Twitter accounts to support Mitt Romney and the Republican presidential ticket. Members can rely on their base of followers to drum up additional support for desired candidates, especially if they are not concerned with their own re-election that cycle. The mere presence of pending elections may further reduce calls for bipartisan legislation as members of the Senate seek to make clear distinctions between themselves and the opposing party. Republican candidates may especially shy away from bipartisan efforts, as primary results indicate that cooperation across the aisle can deter primary voters. For example, former Indiana Republican senator Dick Lugar lost his

2012 primary to a conservative challenger who claimed Lugar was too conciliatory with Democrats.

CONCLUSION

Twitter enables all senators to shape their public brand, indicate attention to preferred issues, and communicate with constituents and special interests, but underlying these activities is a partisan current. The social media site is a low-cost online platform that all senators can utilize to meet their individual goals and engage in partisan rhetoric — whether that be slinging partisan attacks, signaling party loyalty, or in the rare instance, reaching across the aisle. Partisan rhetoric shows no sign of waning and senators' Twitter activity continues to increase, but what are the implications of the confluence of partisan rancor and social media? Further research must answer the question of whether new media technologies, like Twitter, are contributing to the increased partisan behavior in Congress or are they merely an additional vehicle to express partisan sentiment that would have existed otherwise? Traditional media has previously been thought of as merely a “vehicle” in the broader policy process (Kingdon 1984), but does the addition of an alternative avenue for agenda-setting or attention seeking interject that process? Twitter may not just be the conduit for partisanship but it may be feeding partisanship's existence.

As Twitter is further incorporated into the daily routines of U.S. senators over time, the longitudinal effects of Twitter may enable research to critically assess the impact of Twitter on member behaviors. How a member comports themselves within the institution is a reflection of their status within the party and within the governing body —

both of which may be tarnished or bolstered by brand building on social media. The attempt and success of those efforts will be borne out over time as members develop their online style. That online presence is more than just a function of party or leadership status, and that requires further analysis to understand alternative motivating factors that seem poised to continue driving politicians to alternative media platforms.

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